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1. Introduction: Envisioning Future War

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The workshop whose proceedings are presented here was convened to provide the National Intelligence Council (NIC) with insight into the way war in the intermediate future, meaning the next twenty years or so, is viewed from the perspective of America's allies, partners, and potential adversaries. The group took as its starting point two works by the NIC: *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, which seeks to identify emerging economic, social, geopolitical, and other forces that will shape the future security environment; and a more specialized study entitled *Tomorrow's Security Challenges: The Defense Implications of Emerging Global Trends*, which draws specific inferences from these trends with respect to defense organization, strategic planning, and the conduct of war.¹ These documents served as read-ahead material for all the contributors, who were asked to consider how the issues they posed were viewed from elsewhere in the world, either in general or with respect to a range of specialized issues (cyber war, irregular warfare, access and area denial, nuclear proliferation, humanitarian intervention) of particular concern to the United States.

The general theme of the workshop was the influence of global economic, technological, demographic, and other trends on the likely forms that international violence will take in years to come. *Tomorrow's Security Challenges*, prepared for the DoD's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, proposed four alternative scenarios that, should they come to pass, will represent significant shifts from today's global security environment. These four scenarios provide four alternative contexts in which the future of warfare may be considered. They can be summarized as follows:

- The *Concert of Powers* scenario describes a future in which the growing number of powerful states strengthens the international community's ability to deal with future security challenges, creating opportunities for the United States and its allies to forge new multilateral security partnerships.
- The *Fragmented International System* scenario postulates a security environment in which the diffusion of global power makes it more difficult for the international community to achieve consensus on managing global security challenges such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and energy security.
- The *Rise of Non-state Networks* scenario envisions a future in which the dispersion of power and authority away from nation-states gives rise to a myriad of security challenges involving sub-national and transnational entities.
- In the *Return of Great Power Confrontations* scenario, the future security environment is defined by increasing competition between rising and status quo global powers for resources, markets, and influence.

Each of these scenarios poses distinct security challenges for all states in the international system. These challenges will in turn drive strategic requirements, defense budgets, alliance relationships, and military capabilities in diverging directions. It was well understood by all contributors that none of these "alternative" futures will actually unfold as hypothesized, and also that they are not mutually exclusive. Each is basically a thought experiment intended to identify critical pressures on the future

¹ *Global Trends 2025* can be found at http://www.dni.gov/nic/NIC_2025_project.html. *Tomorrow's Security Challenges* appears as Appendix A of these proceedings.

conduct of war. Up to now, these thought experiments have been conducted chiefly from the point of view of the United States. The aim of this workshop was to broaden the terms of the experiment, by considering these alternative futures as they might be viewed by other important international actors.

Within that framework, workshop participants were asked to keep four generic questions in mind as they addressed their particular topics:

- What features of war and warfare in the present can we expect to persist into the future, and which can we expect to fade or transform into something new?
- What current, emerging, or foreseeable social, economic, and political trends, within and beyond the traditional security arena, will drive changes in warfare and conflict over the next 15-20 years?
- How is American thinking on the evolution of modern warfare perceived internationally?
- What new concepts and doctrine for future warfare are emerging among current and prospective violent actors (both states and non-states) around the world?
- The remarks below are not intended to anticipate or summarize the contributions that comprise the remainder of this report, but to highlight some of the themes that bind them together. As will be apparent, all the contributors approached their task in a spirit of cautious self-confidence, based on some shared assumptions that are worth making explicit:
- The past is, within limits, a useful guide to the future.
- The basic character of the world system over the next twenty years will depend mainly on the conduct of its strongest members.
- The preservation of global order is critically dependent on the continued health, increasing integration, and responsible management, of the world economy.

By way of introduction, each of these deserves some preliminary comment.

The Modernization of the Future

It is surprising how many works in security studies begin with the claim that the future is uncertain, and more so than it used to be. This claim often turns on false memories of the Cold War, when world politics is sometimes imagined to have boiled itself down to a well-understood process of stately bilateral confrontation. On that basis the whole idea might simply be dismissed as foolishness. Viewed more generally, however, it is an observation worth pondering. Strictly speaking the future is always unknown, and no more so at one time than another. Yet there is no question that attitudes toward the future, the extent to which it is viewed with complacency, eagerness, or apprehension, have varied a good deal.

For most of human history people have tended to assume that both the past and the future resembled the present, and that human existence played out against an unchanging background defined by nature, divine providence, or some other power beyond humanity's ken. There have, however, been times when people have believed the past was better than the present, and that mankind should do its best to recover the wisdom it had lost. The European Renaissance was such a

period. The so-called scientific revolution that followed, whose methods were inspired by the more inquisitive attitude toward the historical record that the Renaissance exemplified, reversed this attitude. New modes of thought emphasizing dispassionate inquiring and universal theory promised a future that would be better than the present, if only the inherited errors of the past could be overcome.

More recently, the confident expectation of progress that modern science seemed to promise has been modified by the actual experience of life lived amidst increasingly rapid social and technological change. Modernity has not proven to be a steady march toward a better future, but a hard and unexpectedly violent struggle to adapt to circumstances in which, as Karl Marx foresaw, “all that is solid melts into air.” Attitudes toward both the past and the future have accordingly become ambivalent and inconsistent. People still expect to learn from the past, and have been admonished by George Santayana that a failure to learn its “lessons” will condemn them to repeat the course. Yet “dwelling on the past” or (worse) “living” in it, are always bad things, as is “fighting the last war.” People mostly spend their time thinking about the future: what they will do, what they hope for, what they fear. But all they really know, all they have to go on, is the past, which no one expects to happen again.

Modern attitudes toward the future are thus marked by strong apprehensions of discontinuity, moderated by a residual confidence that humanity does possess cognitive and technical resources that give it a fair chance of improving its lot, if only they are applied correctly. In the realm of strategic planning, which is the concern of this workshop, these competing outlooks have long-since resolved themselves into a desire to avoid surprise through the application of systematic information gathering and analysis. It is primarily toward this end that military planning staffs and intelligence agencies have striven for the last century and a half. It has proven a surprisingly thankless task. As can easily be shown, none of the major geopolitical events associated with the cold war—including its transformative conclusion—were foreseen by the intelligence agencies of the major powers. Such short-comings are now routinely deprecated as “intelligence failures,” a phrase that is threatening to become the all-purpose explanation for why, in politics, things often go wrong.

What the phrase actually reveals is a misunderstanding of what we can realistically expect from our efforts to foresee the future. There is, first of all, an element of circularity in the problem that must be acknowledged: surprising events are, by definition, events that defy our expectations. More broadly, however unfathomable such episodes may seem while they are being experienced, in retrospect they are always freighted with an enormous load of historical contingency, turning upon a range of choices, personalities, and local conditions that could just as easily have turned out differently. To say that any given surprise might have been avoided may be true. But to imagine that surprise itself can be overcome—and with it one of the defining features of modern life—is to defy an overwhelming historical record, and perhaps the limits of human knowledge itself.

This project is not about avoiding surprise. It is about correctly contextualizing it, so that when it occurs—and it will—our chances of mastering it will be improved. The value of such improved understanding should not be exaggerated. There are waves that the winds push, and there are tides that the moon pulls. Both can be studied, and must be. Yet it is a fact that the wind can change direction in ways that the best science cannot foresee. It is also a fact, as every sailor knows, that the waves can sink you even if the tide is setting in your favor. Nevertheless, the tides are worth studying too. This project has much to say about the waves that roil today’s politics; but in the end its subject is the tides.

Global Power and Global Order

Ocean tides have proven more amenable to systematic investigation than waves because people have realized that tidal movements are determined by the orbit of the moon. But what if there is no moon? Or many moons? Not the least difference between social and natural science is that, metaphorically speaking, finding the moon is a lot harder in politics than it is in astronomy. Even so, all the contributors to this project accept that the preeminent gravitational force shaping global politics in the intermediate future will arise from the interests, conduct, and values of the strongest states in the international system. In this they have placed themselves firmly on the side of those who believe the future will resemble the past. Yet there are also features of the present that are unusual in historical terms, and worth noting for that reason.

There have been few if any periods in the past when global power has been distributed as incongruously as it is today. At present the military capabilities of the United States are unmatched by any plausible combination of other powers, and are likely to remain so for decades to come. For the rest of the world, military planning is dominated by the requirements of maintaining local order (which can be considerable), and by the prosecution of parochial rivalries over territory, irredentist populations, and so on. Beyond that, all that remains is the problem of adapting to American strength—by obtaining nuclear weapons (Iran, North Korea) or devising niche capabilities (China) designed to hold the US at bay; by maintaining amiable relations despite hard feelings about failing to do one's share (nearly all current American allies except the UK); or by trusting that America's sobering experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan will dissuade it from using force against countries unable to defend themselves except by throwing the bodies of their people in the way of American forces.

This unprecedented distribution of military power contrasts markedly with the rapidly increasing and equally unprecedented diffusion of global wealth. This is not to suggest that we face a future in which the conditions of rich and poor will converge—in human terms the opposite appears to be the case—but rather that the international system is becoming increasingly populated by states who have consciously or implicitly chosen to maintain military capabilities far below their inherent capacities. The European Union, a treaty organization whose members collectively comprise the world's largest economy, is the outstanding example of this, but not the only one. Excluding the United States, global military spending has been declining for years, despite the fact that the world can now afford more “defense” than ever. The optimistic, and arguably the most plausible, interpretation of this development is that it reflects the marginalization of war itself, at least from the point of advanced societies, who may be reaching the conclusion that they have little to hope for from the use of force, and also (more problematically) little to fear.

It is at any rate striking that, among the alternative futures that provided the starting point for this project, the one that came in for the least attention among workshop contributors was the “concert of powers.” This neglect was not owed to any expectation of great power conflict (a scenario that was almost equally neglected), but rather from the perception that there are no “powers” (plural) to concert. Conversely, the scenario that cast the longest shadow over the workshop's proceedings was “fragmentation,” a condition that would arise if one or more strong states were to decide that prevailing forms of political and economic interaction had become disadvantageous to it. In this context the most likely protagonist—perhaps the only plausible one—is China, whose historical traditions are not conducive to multilateralism and collective security, but whose recent, trade-driven economic growth is pushing it firmly toward increasing engagement with, and commitment to, the world system. Exactly how this contest among Chinese cultural habits and economic interests will

play out is one of the two outstanding questions whose answers will define the basic structure of global politics.

The other is how much longer the United States can continue to play the role of systemic guardian and guarantor, and what will happen when it finally lays its burden down. *Pax Americana* was not among the alternative futures the contributors to this project were asked to consider. On the contrary, all realistic conceptions of the global future recognize that American power must wane in relative terms. Judging the limits of its willingness to play the constabulary role that it has assumed in recent years will undoubtedly challenge the good judgment of the rest of the world. Absent an obvious and worthy successor (as the United States provided to Great Britain), new institutions to promote and enforce international cooperation will be called for. It is hard to imagine such innovation occurring absent American leadership. Failure to provide it will leave its legacy in uncertain hands.

Globalization and its Enemies

It will be apparent from the preceding discussion that, however essential military power remains to the maintenance of global order, it does not constitute the essential glue of global politics. That glue has been provided, for some time now, by the progressive integration of the world economy, a process that (to speak in measurable economic terms) began in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, was interrupted by the world wars, and resumed in the early 1950s. It has accelerated decisively since the end of the Cold War, whose ideological shibboleths presented a modest but palpable obstacle to its progress. Economic integration is in turn at the heart of the more general and nebulous process of “globalization,” a term encompassing the increasingly unrestrained international movement of money, goods, information, and (more ominously to some) people.

No one doubts that the increasing volume and speed of transnational activity pose risks to its participants. Globalization affords its beneficiaries new means of harassing, surveilling, and harming each other, deliberately or not. Significant risks can attach to such actions, particularly in the economic sphere. The line between hard bargaining and strategic coercion can be surprisingly faint, and mistaking its location has proven calamitous in the past. Economic decisions, once made, can generally be unmade, with penalties for foolishness or overreaching paid in arrears. Such decisions acquire a different character, however, when market participants attempt to use their market position in lieu of force, to coerce a result that the market itself refuses to produce. Such actions, like the use of force directly, can acquire a finality unknown to other spheres of public life. The extent to which economic integration may entail strategic risk, or invite strategic risk-taking, has been well recognized since the end of the First World War. Nothing in present circumstances should be mistaken for evidence that this risk can safely be ignored.

Nevertheless, contributors to this workshop remain convinced that, within the period they have been asked to consider, recourse to war is less likely to occur among the beneficiaries of globalization than among those who have been left out of it, whether from political incapacity, cultural resistance, or simply because they have nothing to trade. That the advanced world should seek to craft policies to encourage the integration of those left behind is too obvious to require much comment. The more difficult question is how, and how far, it should intervene to discourage recourse to war on the periphery of the system, either from fear that it will spread toward the center, or in response to the qualms that such atavistic and transgressive violence may arouse in world opinion.

The contemporary preponderance of “irregular” warfare, terrorism, massacre, and so on, is partly owed to the fact the other kinds of war have lately retired from the scene. War now arises almost exclusively in regions where even the regular forces of organized states possess only limited capacity for sustained conventional operations. Since 1945, war has never pitted two genuinely capable belligerents against each other; though it has sometimes brought the weak and the strong onto the same battlefield, often to the frustration of the strong. It is possible that this spectacle, however disheartening, may simply be further evidence that war’s value as an instrument of policy is now so steeply discounted by advanced societies, compared to the other instruments at their disposal, that it is of interest only to the disappointed and the marginalized. There are some, however, who fear that, by a malign quirk of fate, the weak will inherit—or at any rate consume—the earth that the strong have made.

Even the weak may now obtain weapons of immense destructiveness, most ominously nuclear and biological, but also conventional arms in sufficient quantity to pose a grave threat to the civil populations, if not to the armed forces, of advanced countries—not to mention the people on whose behalf they purport to fight. Western armies puzzle over how large a share of their resources and mental energy they should devote to the suppression of such fighting. Their task is complicated by the knowledge that the stakes for their own societies in such conflicts are in most instances (Israel being the obvious exception) liable to be so low as to subvert the political will to accept, and inflict, the suffering that will always be involved. This complex calculus is a source of strategic leverage for the enemies of global order, who take for granted the reluctance of the guardians of order to use the overwhelming power at their disposal. This can be a dangerous bet, as anyone who has seen a photograph of Dresden in the spring of 1945 will know. Yet it is one that has paid off in the past, and will presumably continue to do so from time to time, as long as international violence remains confined to the margins of the system; and as long as the stakes really do remain low.